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Can I choose to be who I am not? On (African) Subjectivity

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Abstract

This article engages Abraham Olivier's recent distinction between 'being' and 'choosing to be' within his phenomenological approach to subjectivity in general and to African, communal subjectivity in particular. I recapitulate and problematize aspects of Olivier's reverse phenomenological analysis, briefly contrasting it with more orthodox African approaches to the ontology of the self. I then hone in on the distinction between being who I am and choosing to be who I am not. I argue that I can indeed choose to be who I am not, subject to the proviso that I cannot choose to be who I am. I close with some reflections on the moral significance of conscientiously choosing to be who I am not.

Keywords: African communalism, subjectivity, reverse phenomenology, being who one is not.

I. Introduction

In 'On Being an African', Abraham Olivier offers the following conclusions to his analysis of African subjectivity or 'selfhood':

'(t)here is something that it is like to be an African. Africans are different like Chinese, Americans, Germans and Arabians are different. I can go to Africa and live with as well as adopt the style of a local African community. But my tongue will forever betray me and if not, if I think I am completely African, the community will ever so subtly convey to me the contrary. They might not exclude me, but they will never completely include me – I have not been in their forest. Of course, I cannot, as it were, be an African 'human', but I can choose to see 'myself' as an African. I am indeed free to choose to live as an African. This freedom of self-ascription sets me free to go through any forest and become any person I want to be. There is something that it is like to be an African and that I cannot be. But there is something that it is like to choose to be an African. That I can be.'¹

¹ Abraham Olivier, 'On Being and African', *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy* 25, Nos 1-2, 77-102, at 102.

What sense can be made of the difference between 'being an x' and 'choosing to be an x'? More specifically, what sense can be made of the claim that, while I cannot *be* who I am not I can nonetheless *choose* to be who I am not? *Prima facie*, I find Olivier's claim highly intuitive that I cannot be who I am not. Considered merely formally, the claim is tautological: an x self-evidently cannot (simultaneously) be a -x. Yet the *experience*, in a given situation, of failing to be who it would be apposite to be in that situation is real enough for many people. Immigrants are perhaps the most obvious example: they are often acutely aware of the fact that their tongue forever betrays them – however much they try, they cannot be who they are not. On the other hand, and perhaps by the same token, *are* immigrants not precisely who they are not? Immigrants do in many respects live lives that are at one remove from their consciousness of who they in fact are. Moreover, did many of them not *choose* to be who they are not when they decided to live in environments in which their tongue forever betrays them? Are immigrants *not* who they are – are they who they are *not*? What sort of subjectivity do immigrants have? And if immigrants can be both who they are and who they are not, can't anyone, at least in principle? In which case, what sort of subjectivity does anyone have?²

Olivier's is a general claim about subjectivity: Africans are no more different from Germans than Germans are different from the Chinese. Moreover, Olivier's concern is neither psychological nor sociological; he takes the question as to whether there is anything that it is like to be an African to 'pierce into the heart of the [philosophical] problem of subjective consciousness'.³ He gets to that heart by working back from Dismas Masolo's communal conception of normative personhood to what Olivier takes to be its underlying suppositions

² It may be a moot point whether one can or cannot distinguish between being a self and subjectivity or consciousness of self. Those who think there is a meaningful difference are likely to take the view that who immigrants are and who they take themselves to be are two different issues – the one may be an ontological issue and the other a psychological one. I here assume that Olivier's phenomenological approach supersedes the distinction between objective selfhood and subjective consciousness of self: the self *is* subjectivity. From this perspective, the question of who one is and that of who one chooses to be lie on the same level of analysis: they both concern subjectivity or consciousness of self. It is this that makes Olivier's claim both striking and hard to get a handle on.

³ Olivier, 'On Being and African', 79.

about subjectivity or selfhood.⁴ The thought is that to the extent to which African philosophical accounts of normative personhood are distinctly communal they must find support in a philosophical account of subjectivity that is consonant with communal normativity. Olivier proceeds phenomenologically – one’s ‘self’ is one’s consciousness of oneself as a cognitively perceiving subject. However, Olivier’s phenomenology is distinctive in that he inverts the direction of influence from self to world. Whilst for Husserlian phenomenology subjective intentionality shapes the world of one’s cognitive perceptions, on Olivier’s account the world’s intentional effects on the subject shape her consciousness of self. In adopting this inverse phenomenology, Olivier takes himself to be filling a gap in the literature: while accounts of normative personhood are legion in contemporary African philosophy, questions about subjectivity have so far been neglected. Olivier’s claim in this regard strikes me as largely correct: there are ontologies of the self in modern African philosophy; these typically are both distinct from and consonant with communally conceived normative personhood. However, modern African ontologies of the self are methodologically orthodox in that they tend to treat the self as a type of entity with distinctive and determinate properties. The issue of *subjectivity* – i.e., of consciousness of oneself as a self – is not generally explored in these methodologically more orthodox accounts.⁵

In what follows, my focus will be on Olivier’s inverse phenomenological analysis of contextually situated subjectivity, though I will also say something about African ontologies of the self. I take Olivier’s analysis to pursue two objectives at once: on the one hand, he wants to shore up the communalism of normative personhood by grounding it in an appropriate phenomenological subjectivity. On the other hand, he seeks thereby to generalize some of the claims of African normativity. Insofar as the claims of phenomenological subjectivity are general ones, and in so far as they can be shown to support African communal normativity, the more particular thesis concerning communal normativity is a legitimate philosophical extrapolation of the more general thesis concerning the phenomenology of consciousness or subjectivity. All this strikes me as perfectly

⁴ Dismas Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2010

⁵ But see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press 1986.

plausible. There is nonetheless something about Olivier's distinction between 'being an x' and 'choosing to be an x' that seems to me to go beyond the aim of shoring up communal normativity by way of the phenomenology of consciousness. Indeed, Olivier's claim that I can *choose* to be who I am not seems to me to run counter to, rather than to support, his account inverse phenomenological subjectivity. And yet, while I do find it highly intuitive that I cannot be who I am not, there is also something oddly compelling, at least on reflection, about Olivier's claim that I can nonetheless choose to be who I am not. In what follows I shall try to work through Olivier's dual claim. First, I shall seek to address a methodological puzzle: at what point within Olivier's inverse phenomenology can we legitimately shift from being who the world turns us into to choosing to be who we are not? Second, there are more substantive puzzles. If there can be both other-ascribed subjectivity and self-ascribed subjectivity, what is the relationship between them? Which subjectivity, if either, is more basic: the other-ascribed one or the self-ascribed one? Do persons who choose to be who they are not live at one remove from themselves, or does their other-ascribed subjectivity recede into the background of subjective consciousness, leaving them primarily with their self-ascribed subjectivity?⁶ I begin with a summary of Olivier's account of inverse phenomenology (section II). There then follows an interlude, in which I discuss more orthodox ontological accounts of African selfhood (section III), before turning to the issue of the consistency of choice or self-ascription with the assumption of inverse phenomenology (section IV). Finally, I ask in what ways it may be worth choosing to be who one is not, and how doing so may affect our understanding of who we are (section V).

II. Inverse Phenomenology

Olivier's inverse phenomenology proceeds via Paulin Hountondji's appeal to Husserl's phenomenological method in addressing the question as to a possible future African philosophy.⁷ That question arises for Hountondji from his critique of Temples'

⁶ While the relationship between other-ascription and self-ascription remains underdeveloped in the article under discussion, Olivier has returned to it in some of his subsequent writings – most notably, in Abraham Olivier, 'The Freedom of Facticity', *Religions* 2018. There he offers a more fully developed account of other-ascription as the basis of self-ascription. See also, Olivier, 'Wings of Desire. Reflections on Sexual Desire, Identity, and Freedom', *South African Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming).

⁷ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Second Edition. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1996; Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning. Reflections on Philosophy, Culture and Democracy in Africa*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2002.

ethnophilosophy – more specifically, from Temples’ depiction of the ‘Bantu worldview’ as a timelessly given, collectively perpetuated, a-rationally held set of beliefs. Hountondji’s rejection of Temples’ depiction as but a reflection of European preconceptions about ‘the African mind’ is well known; crucial to Olivier’s purposes is Hountondji’s subsequent and related claim that, if there is to be a future African philosophy, it will have to develop from systematic reflection, by individual African thinkers, out of their actual contexts of experience. Hountondji’s emphasis on individual thinkers’ systematically reflecting out of their distinctive contexts of experience has evident phenomenological connotations. For Olivier, ‘if Hountondji calls for a return of the African subject, its phenomenological sense is a return to the particular, pre-reflective, social roots of African subjects as the starting point of a philosophical or scientific assessment of their subjectivity.’⁸

Distinctive of the phenomenological method of reflection, though not unique to it is its first-personal standpoint: ‘subjectivity refers to first-person “subjective consciousness or experience”, as well as to “self” or “selfhood”’.⁹ This standpoint implies the givenness of some kind of ‘I’, i.e. the givenness of the self as conscious of itself and as distinct from its experiences even if accessible to itself only through these experiences. This, as any rate, is what I assume to be Husserlian phenomenology’s partly Cartesian and partly Kantian inheritances: while for Kant, the ‘I think’, billed as the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’, has to *accompany* all my experiences in order for them to be mine, the Husserlian ‘I’ represents a partial return to the Cartesian cogito. Kantian passive receptivity of the sensible manifold is replaced with a more immediately active, perceptually cognitive grasp of ‘one’s’ world – according to Husserlian phenomenology, the world is a projection of subjective intentionality: world-directed consciousness determines the subject’s experience of the world.

Olivier proposes to take a step beyond Husserlian phenomenology towards what he calls inverse intentionality: ‘if we say that consciousness is defined by intentional effects, the direction of fit is inversed and it is the world that primarily directs consciousness.’¹⁰ On this version of phenomenology, it is not the ‘I’ that projects the world of its experience;

⁸ Olivier, ‘On Being and African’, at 83.

⁹ Ibid., at 81.

¹⁰ Ibid., at 89. This actually seems to me to be a move back towards Kantian passive receptivity – though the phenomenological framework does of course seek to preserve the unity of perceptual experience in lieu of Kant’s distinction between two separate roots of human knowledge.

instead the effects of the world on subjective intentionality shapes the subject's consciousness of self. Relative to the 'I', the world now plays the more active part – the world acts on subjective intentionality rather than the other way around. What moves Olivier to perform this 'inversion' is the dominance of communal conceptions of personhood in African normative theorizing. Olivier claims that, insofar as 'subjectivity is socially and in this sense externally based',¹¹ then 'the conception of inversed intentionality offers a way to explain why and how sociality can be seen as the basis of subjectivity.' (89) In effect, inverse phenomenology denies the ontological primacy of 'I'; the 'I' as subjective consciousness rather emerges from the world's intentional effects on the subject.

But how precisely can we deny the ontological primacy of 'I' in the formation of world experience that is nonetheless subjective, hence both conscious and reflexive? Olivier's inverse intentionality is itself premised on a prior inversion of the constituents of phenomenological intentionality. Again, if we think of traditional phenomenology as eliminating Kant's distinction between sensible intuition and rational understanding as two separate epistemic capacities, we arrive at something like perceptual cognition. To the extent that the antecedently given, Cartesian 'I' has a certain primacy in Husserlian phenomenology, the I's perceptions of the world are cognition-directed. On Olivier's inverse account, by contrast, cognition is perception-directed. One way of putting it is to say that although an 'I' remains, it is not the Cartesian 'I' of rationally cognitive perception, but rather the physically embodied 'I' of sensory perception.¹² For Olivier, perception has an ineliminably *sensory* dimension: 'sensations affect me by drawing my attention to positions, situations, and objects, thereby filling in my experiences in different ways'.¹³ Further, 'every sensation is characteristically intentional for it directs and ties me to objects and contexts in particular ways.'¹⁴ Olivier does not deny subjective intentionality: 'intentional effects' are the effects on subjective consciousness that result from the world's impingement on it. The world's impingement on a rock would not produce intentional effects, as rocks lack subjectivity. Nonetheless, it is the impingement of the world that produces intentional effects in and for the physically embodied subject, not subjective intentionality that directs

¹¹ Ibid., at 87.

¹² Olivier's account here may also betray certain sympathies with elements of Negritude that emphasize the conative aspects of being human.

¹³ Olivier, 'On Being an African', at 87.

¹⁴ Ibid., at 88.

cognitive perception of the world. In consequence, ‘the subject is the project of a world that the subject does not itself primordially project.’¹⁵

If we take this general sketch of inverse intentionality and conjoin it with African accounts of communal personhood, the resulting picture is of consciousness of self as emerging from and as shaped by the surrounding communal world. Olivier says that, ‘what I am, I become first and foremost by virtue of societal positions, for instance, by inheriting the perspective of an African infant on the back of my parent.’¹⁶ More generally, ‘I subsequently *become* the subject of my experiences’ (emphasis added) — my subjectivity is the product of the world’s intentional effects on me. I find Olivier’s example — the infant’s perspective from the parent’s back — striking and powerful. Precisely for that reason, the example must be handled with care. That it is not an innocent example is clear from the distinctiveness, from a European experiential perspective, of a parental practice that is ubiquitous in Africa. What strikes a European as the highly distinctive perspective afforded the infant on her parent’s back will strike an African as the commonest perspective in the world. I take it that this is, in part, Olivier’s point: to be an African is among other things not even conscientiously to notice the perspective of an infant on her mother’s back. To the extent to which that perspective strikes you as anything to write home about, your tongue is betraying you.

How crucial is the experience of one’s first few years on the parent’s back to one’s emergent subjectivity? Is this not just a European’s projection of ‘Africanity’? Would a European pick out the perspective from the push-chair as crucial to the development of European subjectivity? Or rather, if an African were so to pick it out as crucial to the formation of European subjectivity, would a European have reason to take this seriously? In short, Olivier’s example runs the risk of ‘essentialising’ what it is to be an African from a perspective that is external to being one. This risk does not invalidate Olivier’s example. In one sense, the risk attends the entire field of modern African philosophy as it finds itself confronted with the historically conditioned peculiarity that it must both affirm the distinctiveness of its possible contributions to the discipline in general whilst yet avoiding ‘essentialising’ those contributions in Temples-like manner. As noted above, the challenge

¹⁵ Ibid., at 89.

¹⁶ Ibid., at 95.

lies in drawing out general insights from within distinctly African experiences and thoughts.¹⁷ Olivier's example of the infant on her parent's back may well succeed in illustrating what the European push-chair precisely fails to be able to show, namely, that *any* infant's pre-cognitive perceptual perspective is in fact *comprehensive* of the entire social world around her. Thus considered, the example is striking not so much because of its exotic appeal for those to whom it is not a reference to the mundane but rather because it serves to illustrate a general phenomenological point: namely, that the mundane perspective, whichever form it happens to take, pre-cognitively opens up an entire social world to those whose perspective it is.

The fact that the particular example serves to illustrate the general point particularly well is a function of the practice itself: the infant accompanies her mother, on the latter's back, every day throughout the day, so is routinely perceptually exposed to the entire range of diverse social activities and interactions from that perspective. Indeed, Olivier's point may be twofold: on the one hand, the example illustrates the general claim of inverse intentionality – the claim that our exposure to the social world around us produces intentional effects in us that in turn shape our subjectivity. On the other hand, the example also illustrates just how much the infant implicitly learns, by way of perceptual absorption, about the social world of which she is a constituent member. What is more, the infant *herself* already plays a social role in her social world: she plays the role of the infant on her mother's back.¹⁸ She is not an impartial observer so much as a participant learner – other community members interact with her on her mother's back and she with them from that position. Olivier's point is that according to inverse intentionality, the infant's emergent subjectivity – her emergent consciousness of herself – is the product of the intentional effects on her of the sweep of sociality around her – both observant and interactive – from that perspective

¹⁷ On theorising the relation between the culturally particular and the universal, see especially Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars. An African Perspective*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.

¹⁸ On subjectivity as social role playing see also J. David Velleman, *How We Get Along*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. See also J. David Velleman, 'The Self as Narrator' in his *Self to Self. Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), 203-23. There are some methodological similarities between narrative and phenomenological accounts of subjectivity, though on the narrative account the emphasis is on self-construction rather than consciousness of self.

But now the objection may be that inverse intentionality makes a merely psychological point. We all now know that our early years are the most formative – however, psychology is not philosophy. While we may concede that the infant’s experience on her mother’s back is psychologically formative for her, what does this tell us about subjectivity in a philosophically significant sense? I do not want to get drawn into debates about disciplinary boundaries – I raise the point in part because it will seem like an obvious objection from at least some philosophical perspectives.¹⁹ I am less sure that it is an obvious objection from a *phenomenological* perspective: proponents of the latter may reasonably hold that psychological practice tracks (inverse) phenomenological insight -- the insight that human subjectivity is indeed a function of cognitively perceptual interaction with the world. From a phenomenological perspective, the response to the objection from psychologism may well be either that the disciplinary distinction is itself overdrawn or that -the phenomenology of subjectivity serves as bedrock to psychology as a more applied form of inquiry into (the pathologies of) phenomenologically formed subjectivity.²⁰

I shall instead end this section by raising a worry of my own – one that I will return to below. The worry anticipates Olivier’s subsequent point about our supposed ability to choose to be who we are not. The worry is that if, as Olivier puts it, ‘other-ascription precedes self-ascription’ such that we are, in the first instance, who our social world turns us into, then at what point does self-ascription overtake other-ascription such that we can choose to be who, phenomenologically, we are not? It is at *this* level that the example of the infant on her mother’s back may be problematic: while we may agree that the small child is indeed exposed to a social world which she absorbs as participant learner; we may also ask at what point this process of learning by absorption ceases. It will have to cease if self-ascription is to come to the fore: yet how can self-ascription come to the fore without thereby undercutting the claims of inverse phenomenology? That is the methodological worry. Substantively, too, Olivier’s position raises a number of questions regarding the relationship between other-ascribed and self-ascribed subjectivity. I am primarily exercised

¹⁹ The issue of ‘psychologism’ in connection with reflexive subjectivity pre-occupied analytic approaches to Kant’s transcendental idealism. See, especially, P.F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense. An Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*. London: Routledge Publishers 1989, esp. 162-74.

²⁰ I briefly return to this issue in section V.

by the more substantive questions. Before turning to some of them, I want to undertake a brief excursion into more traditional African ontologies of the self.

III. Ontologies of the self

As noted, according to Olivier, while discussions of normative personhood are ubiquitous in current African philosophy, relatively little has so far been said about subjectivity or consciousness of self. Olivier implies, moreover, that subjectivity has a certain ontological primacy in relation to the normativity of personhood: his account of how the self conceives of itself is meant to shore up communal normativity. And indeed, if we think of one of the most influential accounts of communal personhood – that by Ifeyani Menkiti²¹ – Olivier’s phenomenology of subjectivity does a good job in supplying a complementary account of the intended kind. Yet while it is true that subjectivity in the phenomenological sense is not a dominant topic, the *ontology* of the self as distinct from *normative* personhood is widely discussed in current African philosophy (though the term used is usually the ontology of the *person* rather than the *self*). Generally, moreover, a close relation is at least implicitly assumed to obtain between the ontology of the person and the normativity of personhood. Take Kwame Gyekye’s and Segun Gbadegesin’s respective analyses of traditional Akan and Yoruba beliefs about the ontological constitution of the person as a distinctive kind of being.²² Though neither adopts a phenomenological approach, both Gyekye and Gbadegesin can reasonably be construed as responding to Hountondji’s demand that any viable African philosophy must engage actual contexts of African experience. Both bring linguistic and conceptual analyses to bear on traditional beliefs about the person; both seek thereby to lay bare what the Akan and the Yoruba respectively must be taken to believe about the constitution of persons. My aim in this section is not to engage in detailed discussion of Gyekye and Gbadegesin’s respective accounts – what follows is merely a summary of some key areas of substantive ontological overlap. My chief interest lies in flagging these more

²¹ Ifeyani Menkiti, ‘On the Normative Conception of a Person’ in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *Companion to African Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 2006, 324–31.

²² See, respectively, Segun Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy. Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. New York: Peter Lang, 1991; especially chapters 2 and 3; Kwame Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought. The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Revised Edition. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995, especially chapters 6 and 7.

orthodox ontologies of the person as potential alternatives to Olivier's phenomenology of the self.

What are the differences between what I call orthodox ontology of the person and phenomenological subjectivity? The crucial difference can perhaps be put in terms of the distinction between an external or third-personal and an internal or first-personal perspective. As noted, while an orthodox ontology enquires into the kind of being a person is, the phenomenology of subjectivity considers a person's experience or consciousness of itself as that kind of being. The external perspective does not obviously rule out the internal perspective: to ascertain what kind of being persons are in general is not in itself to rule out the importance of the albeit separate question as to what it is to be conscious to being a being of that kind. That said, one might take the view – and I take it that, following Kant, phenomenological inquiry generally does take the view that subjectivity cannot be approached in the same manner as objectivity: 'the self' (or person) is not just one kind of being or entity among others. Indeed, 'the self' may not be any kind of entity at all: we cannot take the objective perspective onto ourselves but can at most posit some kind of placeholder self as the formal depository of our experience of unitary consciousness. For the phenomenologist, the internal perspective does not so much supplement the external one as replace it. The phenomenologist does not ask, 'what are the constituent properties of the type of entity called person?', but asks, rather, 'what is it to be conscious of oneself as a self?' Thus, while for the orthodox ontologist the issue of subjectivity may be supplementary to the objective features of personhood, for the phenomenologist personhood is subjectivity all the way down.

In modern African philosophy, the continued prevalence of the orthodox ontological approach may have to do with the endeavour to overcome colonially superimposed beliefs about the self, especially through the influence of Christian missionary work.²³ The distinctiveness of many African accounts of the self emerges especially clearly in the emphasis which both Gyekye and Gbadegesin (as well as others) place on its tripartite structure in traditional Akan and Yoruba thought. Whereas Western ontologies traditionally follow Plato in distinguishing between the material body and the immaterial soul, the Akan

²³ Cf. Okot p'Bitek, *A Short History of African Religions in Western Scholarship*. Revised Edition. New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2011.

account conceives a person as a composite of *okra* (divine breath), *sunsum* (personal spiritedness or character), and *honam* (body). The Yoruba account similarly distinguishes between *emi* (divine breath), *ori* (spirit, character, bearer of destiny), and *ara* (body). The precise nature of the constitution of Akan *sunsum* and Yoruba *ori* respectively, and that of the relation between *sunsum* and *okra* on the one hand and between *emi* and *ori* on the other are a matter of considerable dispute. What is nonetheless clear, especially in contradistinction to the Christian division between immaterial soul and material body, is the inadequacy of that binary distinction when superimposed upon Akan and Yoruba accounts: both the Akan *sunsum* and the Yoruba *ori* are thought by many African thinkers to lie somewhere along a sliding spectrum between material and immaterial extremes.²⁴ Again, *okra* and *emi* appear to be non-individuated constituents of personhood; indeed, both may be constituent features of all organic life, binding all forms of organic life together at some level of their respective beings. Finally, at least some Akan writers associate *sunsum* and *honam* respectively with lineage when they claim that *sunsum* is passed on by the father, and *mogya* – an element of *honam* – by the mother.²⁵

As noted, one may wonder why modern African thinkers appear to cleave to orthodox ontologies of the self in the face of powerful philosophical objections to the treatment of the person as any kind of entity at all. Even conceding the historical need for and cultural value of retrieving traditional African ontologies from Christian modifications of them, one may object that this should be the work of anthropologists more than philosophers: does not the carving out of a distinctly African ontology of the person undermine the search for universal criteria of personhood? Here is yet another disciplinary boundary dispute I do not wish to get drawn into. Suffice it to say that, from the perspective of African philosophy, the prevalence of underlying Christian beliefs in Western philosophical thinking is presumably no less pregnant with unacknowledged anthropology – part of the point of the juxtaposition is presumably to draw attention to the latter's lack of universal warrant.

²⁴ On the status of *sunsum*, contrast Kwasi Wiredu, 'The Akan Concept of Mind', *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies* 1983 and Kwame Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought* (op. cit.), 85-90.

²⁵ Gyekye denies the particular association of *sunsum* with paternal lineage; he instead identifies 'ntoro' with paternal lineage, and *mogya* with maternal lineage. Contrast Anthony Kwame Appiah, 'Akan and Euro-American Concepts of the Person' in Lee Brown (ed.), *African Philosophy. New and Traditional Perspectives* (Oxford; Oxford University Press 2004), 21-34.

Either way, my interest here lies in asking whether these more orthodox ontologies of the person do not provide philosophical underpinnings to communal normativity much in the way Olivier's phenomenological approach aspires to do. To the extent that they do, do we need phenomenological subjectivity at all or do orthodox ontologies already take care of Olivier's concern to provide philosophical grounds for communal normativity? *Prima facie* one surely must assume there to be an internal connection between ontologies of the person and accounts of normativity: the terminological distinction between person, self, and subjectivity is largely technical; it reflects a division of intellectual labour concerning a subject matter that is in fact a philosophically complex unity. Indeed, in relation to personhood the internal connection between ontology and normativity may be especially strong in traditional accounts. There, the division of intellectual labour may be less marked than it is in current academic philosophical contexts. Moreover, the oral transmission of ontological accounts of the person – often, as in pre-Platonic Greek philosophy, in the form of allegories and foundational myths – can itself be presumed to have normative as well as epistemological purpose.

One might object, 'yes, but abstracting from all that – abstracting from tradition, orality, moral pedagogy – are African ontologies of the person inherently communal?' It is not clear to me that one necessarily *can* abstract 'from all that' – traditional African orality and phenomenology may well be on a par in the thought that once one has performed those abstractions there may be nothing left to discuss about the person or the self. Still, Gyekye and Gbadegesin do approach traditional Akan and Yoruba accounts ontologically – they do treat the person as a kind of entity with determinate constituent components or properties. On both accounts those properties do include communally oriented features. The mentioned if contested association of sunsum and honam with paternal and maternal lineage respectively is one such feature; another is the binding force of okra and emi respectively, which links all organic life spiritually (i.e., non-physically). Relatedly, both Gyekye and Gbadegesin include in their respective ontologies beliefs about personal destiny. In Gbadegesin's account, for example, ori is the (semi-physical) bearer of personal destiny and personal destinies are conceived as interconnected: any one person's destiny is a function in part of the destinies of those whom he or she interacts with. The criteria for judging a given destiny good or bad centrally include its bearer's communal membership

and service to the community.²⁶ These and other features of orthodox ontological approaches to the person thus do seem to imply communal normativity. From the reverse order of analysis, too, i.e., moving from normativity to ontology, ontological commitments inform normative ones. Recall Menkiti's contention that, under his maximal conception, ancestorship constitutes the highest possible form of normative personality. Belief in ancestral existence is clearly predicated on relevant ontological commitments – here, too, we have something of a 'natural' linkage between ontology and normativity. While Olivier may be correct to say that in contemporary African philosophy questions about subjectivity – consciousness of self as a self – so far remain relatively neglected, it is not the case, it seems to me, that existing orthodox ontologies of personhood in the literature cannot shore up communal normativity. In this latter respect, Olivier's approach does perhaps not so much fill a gap as provide one further alternative approach.

IV. Subjectivity, Other-Ascription, and the Limits of Self-Ascription

The point of the above ontological interlude was to qualify Olivier's contention regarding African philosophers' neglect of possible philosophical grounds of communal normativity: while questions about subjectivity do remain relatively neglected, systematic linkages between the ontology of persons and communal normativity do exist. Moreover, nothing speaks against extending inquiry from the ontological constitution of persons to consciousness of oneself as such a being. Granted, from a phenomenological perspective the treatment of the person as a type of entity will seem misconceived. That is, however, a separate issue concerning divergent philosophical methodologies: proponents of orthodox ontology may find the phenomenological approach no less problematic in certain other respects. Thus, for example, on the orthodox approach the difference between other-ascription and self-ascription will more likely belong to the realm of psychological or sociological inquiry. On the ontological account, there won't be two ways of being conscious of oneself as a person -- there will only be the correct way that tracks determinate features of personhood.

²⁶ Segun Gbadegesin, 'Toward a Theory of Destiny' in Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publisher 2006, 313-23; also Segun Gbadegesin, 'An Outline of a Theory of Destiny', in Lee Brown (ed.), *African Philosophy. New and Traditional Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004, 51-68.

In returning now to the phenomenological approach, we saw that Olivier's distinction between classic Husserlian phenomenology and inverse phenomenology depends on the distinction between other- and self-ascription. I assume that, strictly speaking, classical phenomenology would not invoke even the notion of self-ascription. Self-ascription is a matter of choosing one's personal identity or self-conception – it is in this sense that self-ascription contrasts, for Olivier, with other-ascription. Husserlian phenomenology, by contrast, predicates world-making capacities of an 'I' whose formal givenness as a conscious intentionality is presupposed. Strictly speaking, therefore, only inverse phenomenology operates with the distinction between other-ascription and self-ascription. We saw that other-ascription is a direct consequence of inverse intentionality: the social world shapes the self I become through that world's intentional effects on me. Yet to the extent to which I have the capacity for subjectivity or consciousness of self I must at some point become conscious of myself as someone with a socially ascribed self-identity. If it wants to accommodate subjectivity – consciousness of self as a self – inverse phenomenology must accommodate the idea of reflexive consciousness; it must accommodate the idea of the self's reflexive endorsement of its other-ascribed identity. If subjectivity is the issue, then I cannot merely *be* a communal self but I must also be conscious of and must endorse myself *as* a communal self.

Prima facie, it is hard to see how inverse phenomenology *can* accommodate reflexive self-consciousness. The difficulty might be illustrated with reference to John Mbiti's well-known aphorism that, 'I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am'. For Mbiti as for Olivier, other-ascription precedes self-endorsement. Against this, Gyekye has objected that communally ascribed personhood presupposes individual selfhood: while others may turn me into the social being I become, there nonetheless must be a self in the first place that is capable of becoming a social being. For Gyekye, communal personhood depends on an ontology of individuated selves.²⁷

One may retort that Gyekye's point against Mbiti (and Menkiti) need not worry Olivier. Inverse phenomenology does not deny that there must be some sort of subjectivity

²⁷ Cf. Kwame Gyekye, 'Person and Community in African Thought' in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader*. Second Edition (New York: Routledge Publishers 2002, 297-313. To be fair to Mbiti, Gyekye tends simply to assume that this must be the case – he does not show how consciousness of itself is itself possible.

that is intentionally affected by the world: the very notion of ‘intentional affect’ presupposes some conception of subjectivity. Inverse phenomenology merely claims that in the relation between self and world, world has a certain primacy in the formation of subjective consciousness of self. Of course, the existential status of the sort of subjectivity presupposed differs from Gyekye’s ontologically orthodox account. While for Gyekye, an ontologically individuated self constitutes a particular kind of entity, Olivier’s reverse phenomenology relies on something closer to Kant’s distinction between empirical selfhood and formal or ‘transcendental’ consciousness of self. Transcendental consciousness becomes conscious of its socially constituted empirical self through the world’s intentional effects upon it. In one sense, this Kantian distinction between empirical and transcendental aspects of subjectivity renders it less mysterious how *other-ascription* can give rise to consciousness of *self* in the first place: one’s transcendental self becomes conscious of others’ ascription of one’s empirical self. But isn’t this Kantian distinction an even worse worry for Olivier than is Gyekye’s more orthodox ontological point?

If we say that other-ascription *presupposes* the thought of a formal or transcendental consciousness of self, are we not then saying that the latter has a logical primacy over the former after all? Other-ascription shapes empirical selfhood, yet something like Kant’s transcendental self is itself a necessary condition of possible *consciousness* of other-ascription. If that is the case – if transcendental consciousness of self is a necessary condition of empirical selfhood – then my having the reflexive thought of my empirical self *as me* (or as my ‘self’) affords me a certain reflexive distance between my empirical self and my transcendental capacity for consciousness of that self. I suspect that this result may amount to more than Olivier had bargained for. If I understand Olivier correctly, he is after a kind of other-ascribed subjectivity that is in certain fundamental respects both irrefutable and non-rejectable – other-ascription all the way down, as it were. Olivier’s thought is, after all, that although I can choose to be who I am not, I cannot choose to be who I am. In that sense, my choosing to be who I am not is at the same time always an affirmation of the ineliminable primacy of other-ascription. From this perspective, the Kantian distinction between empirical self and transcendental subjectivity threatens to turn other-ascription into a merely *contingent* determinant of empirical selfhood: the grounds of subjectivity are not other-ascription but, more fundamentally, the transcendental capacity for consciousness of empirical selfhood. Although we become aware of that capacity only

through the experience of empirical selfhood, the latter could in principle arise through experiences other than other-ascription. Since Olivier regards other-ascription as constitutive of one's subjectivity he must repudiate the Kantian distinction between empirical selfhood and reflexive, transcendental subjectivity.²⁸

But can he repudiate it? The difficulty for Olivier is that insofar as he is committed to subjectivity understood in terms of one's consciousness of oneself as a self, then he must be committed to some form of reflexivity. Kant's notion of the transcendental 'I' or 'unity of apperception' that becomes conscious of itself as a self through the unity of its experiences may serve Olivier well here. But it is then hard to see how Olivier can avoid some version of the Kantian distinction between empirical self and the transcendental capacity for empirical selfhood. Yet to commit to that distinction would seem to undermine the constitutive status of other-ascription; it would have to accord the transcendental capacity for empirical selfhood constitutive priority over other-ascription. It seems to me that, on Olivier's inverse phenomenology, we can either have constitutive other-ascription without reflexive subjectivity – but then cannot in fact have consciousness of self as a self. Alternatively, we can have reflexive subjectivity without constitutive other-ascription – but then other-ascription is merely one among many possible alternative sources of empirical selfhood. It is

²⁸ In personal conversation, Olivier has suggested to me that he may be able to accommodate this Kantian challenge regarding the logical priority of the capacity for reflexive consciousness of self – subjectivity – over other-ascription. Briefly, Olivier suggests that 'transcendental subjectivity is as such conditioned by other-ascription: others, with whom I interact, shape my transcendental capacity to reflect and to conceive of myself, and to be free to do so, *before* I can take the freedom to choose what I am not.' The claim appears to be that I learn or acquire the capacity for reflexivity itself through the process of socialization. At least from a Kantian perspective, my problem with this proposal is that it seems to turn a formal or presuppositional requirement of empirical selfhood into something that is itself empirically acquired. But this may then open up an infinite regress: if I socially acquire my capacity for reflexivity, in virtue of what do I have *that* capacity? In other words, must we not now posit a capacity communally to acquire reflexivity? I think my point is this: if it is subjectivity we are after – i.e. consciousness of oneself as a socially constituted self, say – must we not then predicate some notion or capacity for selfhood that is distinct from that of which it is conscious as being? I cannot really see a way around this – though I also concede that, at this point, the Kantian in me and the phenomenologist in Olivier may simply have arrived at an ontological crossroads, as it were.

hard to see how we can have both reflexive consciousness and constitutive other-ascription. And yet Olivier needs both.

What if we say this: it is precisely at the point of choosing to be who we are *not* that we become reflexively aware of the constitutive nature, for our *empirical* self, of other-ascription? In choosing to be who we are not we come up against the ineliminable remainder of other-ascription – we cannot choose to be who we are. From this vantage point, whilst consciousness of other-ascription does presuppose something like Kantian reflexive subjectivity, the distancing effect that results from reflexive consciousness of one's empirical self as other-ascribed does not warrant the inference to the merely contingent status of other-ascription. For while the initial impression of the contingent nature of other-ascription brings into purview alternative possible grounds of empirical subjectivity -- self-ascription, for example – the exercise of self-ascription in fact serves to bring to the fore the non-contingent basis of other-ascription. While we can choose to be who we are not, we cannot choose to be who we are: there will always be a remainder, our tongue will forever betray us. We can choose to be who we are not only against the background of already being who in fact we are. In short, while consciousness of other-ascription presupposes reflexive subjectivity, self-ascription in turn affirms the primacy of other-ascription.

V. Choosing to be who one is not

My claim in the last section has been that Olivier *can* accommodate some version of Kantian reflexive subjectivity within inverse phenomenology so long as he simultaneously keeps in play the distinction between other-ascription and self-ascription. While other-ascription without reflexive subjectivity cannot yield consciousness of self as an (other-ascribed) self, other-ascription without possible self-ascription would render other-ascription constitutively contingent rather than necessary in relation to empirical selfhood. It is the limits of self-ascription – the fact of an unavoidable remainder – that shows other-ascription to be constitutive of empirical selfhood. We can choose to be who we are not precisely because we cannot choose to be who we are.

But why *would* we choose to be who we are not? Should we not rather simply be who we are? What is the point of self-ascription if, far from yielding 'authentic' or 'autonomously chosen' selfhood, it simply shows up the *limits* of our choices in this regard?

According to the account here given, are we not precisely choosing to be 'inauthentic' when we choose to be who we are not? What is the value in that?

There is in fact a precursor in modern African philosophy to Olivier's distinction between being and not being oneself. This is Frantz Fanon's broadly phenomenological account of the colonial subject's inner experience of himself as a self who he is not.²⁹ According to Fanon, the colonial subject lives in a continuous state of acute existential anxiety. He is aware of himself as who he is not in a dual sense of that notion: on the one hand, he repudiates the self who he is – he has come to share the colonizer's negative associations with his 'native' selfhood. On the other hand, he is also aware of the fact that he can never be who he has chosen to be – an 'educated native', as it were. Even the educated native will always be a native – there will always be a remainder, hence always an awareness of the self-deluding nature of this chosen self-conception. On Fanon's account, stable subjectivity – a secure sense of self – is impossible under colonial conditions: you cannot reflexively endorse colonial other-ascription, but nor does choosing to be who you are not offer you an escape from this particular kind of other-ascription: the colonial remainder simply brings you up against the limits of your choice.

Fanon's account of colonial subjectivity is a particularly tragic account of enforced, not to say morally criminal, other-ascription. As is well-known, for Fanon, the only possible escape from this state of existential anxiety is cathartic violence: colonially enforced subjectivity can be overcome only by rooting it out entirely and at the collective rather than merely the individual level. While Olivier does at one point mention Fanon,³⁰ his chief reference points are Masolo's and other African accounts of communal normativity; Olivier's version of other-ascribed selfhood is therefore overwhelmingly benign. This is no criticism of Olivier – colonial other-ascription is a perverse version of an ordinarily benign process of socialization (which is of course also why it is so powerfully pernicious). But given that Olivier essentially endorses benign forms of other-ascription that issue in communal normativity, why does he nonetheless also invoke the possibility of self-ascription?

I have argued that Olivier may require self-ascription in order to underscore the primacy of other-ascription: however, this is a methodological point. At issue now is the

²⁹ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (op. cit.).

³⁰ Olivier, 'On Being and African', 97.

value or worth of self-ascription in the light of Olivier's normative endorsement of other-ascription. Why, given that I cannot be an African, would I nonetheless choose to be one? The question arises with particular force in view of the fact that, on Olivier's account, when I choose to be an African, I do not thereby become one but rather become someone whom I am not. Is this not to choose a state of self-alienation? Choosing to be who I am not will forever put me at one remove from myself: there will forever be that remainder that reminds me that I am not who I have chosen to be. Short of having an alien self-conception imposed on me, as under colonial conditions, why would I choose a life at one remove from myself?

Recall: according to Olivier, '(t)here is something that it is like to be an African and that I cannot be. But there is something that it is like to choose to be an African. That I can be.'³¹ I said that immigrants might be said to choose to be who they are not. Granted, the notion of 'choice' here is loose and imprecise: most immigrants do not exactly choose to relocate but find themselves driven to do so by chance and circumstance. Nonetheless, by and large, personally successful immigration does appear to depend to a significant extent on endorsing a new self-conception. The immigrant will never fully shed her primary self-conception – she will never fully shed a sense of where she comes from. Yet she may endorse her new self-conception as someone who in many ways is who she is not – she may endorse and successfully live with a sense of being at one remove from her primary (other-ascribed) self. Indeed, over time the immigrant may begin to wonder whether her primary self is her 'true' or 'real' or 'authentic' self: is she who she 'really' is, or is she not 'really' who she is not? The immigrant may begin to take the view that it does not really matter who she 'really' is. Authentic self-conceptions and autonomously formed life-plans may come to be seen as overrated: for most of us, life affords us neither and the fact that it does not may not be such a bad thing.³²

Still, while the immigrant is in many respects a good example of someone who finds herself endorsing a 'chosen' (in a very loose sense) conception of who she is not, Olivier's point seems in certain respects stronger: it is as though he were positively encouraging us to choose to be Africans. One way of putting it is to suggest that, at least in Olivier's case, the

³¹ Olivier, 'On Being and African', op. cit., 102.

³² On the open-endedness of human life, see especially Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.

emphasize on choice is fully intended – it is not to be taken in some vague or loose sense to do with nefarious remarks about autonomous life plans or authentic self-conceptions. It may, to the contrary, have a certain political ring to it. You do not *choose* to be that which you would rather not be – that which you despise or look down upon. When Olivier suggests that those who are not Africans can nonetheless choose to be Africans he is portraying being African in a desirable light. Olivier's choice of terminology suggests that, while it may be unfortunate for non-Africans that they cannot be African, they fortunately nonetheless can choose to become such. Being and becoming African are portrayed as intrinsically desirable ways in which to be. If you choose to be an African you can go through the forest and you can begin to learn about and imbibe the practices, beliefs, and aesthetics of that which makes being African distinctive from being Chinese, of German. It is true that your tongue will forever betray you – you will never quite be African. Nonetheless, you'll get as close as you can to being African.

In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, the invitation to choose to be an African makes a lot of sense – and again, Olivier's distinction between other-ascription and self-ascription is crucial here. A degree of humility will always be in order: choosing to be is not being and maintaining a hold on the difference seems crucial. Still, the desirability of being African – and I here take Oliver to have in mind being a 'black' African socially and culturally – strikes me as a political-cum-philosophical point that is well taken. Of course, the point generalizes. Choosing to be an African may have particularly positive resonances in current South Africa, but this is not to say that the essential desirability, in terms of social, moral and cultural heritage, of being African does not extend beyond that particular country or beyond the African continent more generally. Nor is it only desirable to choose to be an African. Choosing to be who one is not – learning to appreciate the potentially infinite plurality of what it is to be a human and a self – seems to me to offer a generally attractive antidote to our preoccupation with the metaphysical fixity of the self and with the assumed moral importance of personal autonomy or authenticity. Of course, consciousness of the circumscribed nature of Olivier's suggested choice is essential: both the fact that the object of choice is negative (i.e., choosing to be who we are *not*), and the fact of an ineliminable remainder (our tongue will forever betray us) are built into the distinction and relation between other- and self-ascription. In choosing to be who we are not we are not choosing to be who we are; rather, we are expressing the essential desirability of being something or

someone – African, Chinese, German or Arabian – that we are not. This form of self-ascription seems broadly consonant with communal normativity moreover: just as for advocates of communal normativity the moral importance of the individual self, though never denied, is also never all-consuming, so on the interpretation of chosen self-ascription here offered, we may choose to be who we are not not in order to affirm our autonomy or our authenticity but rather in order to participate, however, imperfectly, in the lives of distant others.³³

³³ Evidently inspired by Abraham Olivier's 'On Being an African', this paper has benefitted enormously from discussions about (African) personhood with Martin Ajei, Caesar Atuire, and Dieter Sturma. A first draft of the paper was presented at a workshop on 'Persons and Community' held at the University of Bonn on 25 June 2018. My thanks to participants for their helpful comments and suggestions.